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SUBJECT: GAZA DISENGAGEMENT: CABINET POISED TO APPROVE
SETTLER WITHDRAWALS, SEPARATION BARRIER ROUTE

Classified By: Political Counselor Norman Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) Prime Minister Sharon is poised to obtain decided Cabinet majorities in two historic votes scheduled for February 20: to approve the "Amended Disengagement Plan -- Evacuation of Settlements and Territories" (the Amended Plan) and to approve a revised route of the separation barrier around the southern West Bank. In practical terms, Cabinet approval of the Amended Plan, along with this week's Knesset approval of settler compensation legislation, will empower the GOI to send out evacuation notices as early as February 21 to all settlers in the Gaza Strip as well as in the four northern West Bank settlements slated for evacuation. GOI lawyers have recommended giving settlers at least five months' notice before forcing them to leave the settlements. The Amended Plan also divides the settlements to be evacuated into four groups, and requires that the Cabinet reconvene prior to the evacuation date of each group to discuss circumstances affecting the evacuation.

¶2. (C) As many as seven Likud ministers -- Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Health Minister Daniel Naveh, Education Minister Limor Livnat, Agriculture Minister Yisrael Katz, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and Ministers-Without-Portfolio Tzachi Hanegbi and Natan Sharansky -- may vote against settlement evacuations on Sunday, although Netanyahu and Shalom have notably not yet announced their intentions. Education Minister Limor Livnat announced February 18 that she cannot support the Amended Plan unless it explicitly states that the Cabinet will actually vote on each of the four evacuation phases -- not just reconvene to discuss them. Other Cabinet opponents are expected to tie their support for the evacuation plan to Sharon's agreement to hold a disengagement referendum, a move Sharon has repeatedly rejected. Regardless of how the seven vote, Sharon's Amended Plan still has a comfortable Cabinet majority of 15 of the 22 ministers. Opposing votes by senior Likud ministers, including Netanyahu, would be a modest embarrassment to Sharon within his party, but one he appears comfortable with.

¶3. (SBU) Sharon will also ask the Cabinet to approve a revised southern route of the separation barrier around the southern Hebron hills that is designed to comply with last year's High Court ruling that the routing must take into account its impact on the Palestinian population. The section to be presented to the Cabinet on Sunday will stick closer to the Green Line than previous proposed routes, although Ma'aleh Adumim and other key settlements surrounding Jerusalem will remain on the "Israeli" side of the barrier. A ring road will be built east of Ma'aleh Adumim to facilitate Palestinian travel between Jenin and Hebron. The revised route will reportedly include seven percent of the West Bank on the Israeli side, whereas the earlier route would have included some 16 percent of the West Bank. Public estimates of the number of Palestinians ending up on the Israeli side of the revised route vary from 10,000 to 20,000. In a radio interview February 18, Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres said that the fence route "does not add too many Palestinians (to the Israeli side) against their wishes. And it corresponds, reasonably enough to security needs."

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